

**Information conveyors, performance enablers. The different reception of diplomatic dispatches
in two embassies for Francesco II Sforza (Southern Germany and London, 1526-1527)**

What did an early 16th century diplomatic dispatch do? Today, when the dispatch is delivered to the desk of an archive reading room, the answer to this question seems obvious: dispatches convey information. Yet, the original context of reception of the documents under the examination of scholars was typically much more complex than the quiet archive reading room. At court or inside inns, in trustworthy or hostile environments, diplomats and agents of every rank saw dispatches not only as the information conveyors that told them how to operate, but also as objects that enabled performance. Indeed, because of the material possession of a dispatch, ambassadors could approach someone else, flaunt connections, bolster their status, justify their presence.

This paper aims at analysing the very different functions (informational/relational) diplomatic dispatches could serve, depending on the context of reception of their addressee; and how this different functions could shape both the content and the form of the documents.

To this end, I will look at two specific embassies for Francesco II, the last member of the Sforza dynasty to rule Milan and its duchy (1522-1535). In late 1526, Francesco II had just begun a five-year exile, after Charles V had banned him from his own dominion for an alleged conspiracy. Therefore, the duke had to keep the pace of foreign affairs to regain political credit, but he was hardly able to maintain the European-wide network he needed to succeed. Two of Francesco's orators, Amico Taegio (d. 1533) at the court of Ferdinand I of Austria, and Agostino Scarpinelli (active 1520-1535) at the court of Henry VIII of England, found themselves in a particularly critical situation.

On the one hand, Taegio had to leave court after the rift in the relationship between the Hapsburg and the Sforza, because his outgoing letters were blocked, and the incoming ones were intercepted. He stood isolated in Augsburg, craving for dispatches as a source of information on what to do, no matter their form. On the other hand, Scarpinelli suddenly stopped receiving dispatches from Lombardy, and the fact that he was not seen handling letters rapidly undermined his credibility at the Tudor court. He could not be content with the indirect signals the duke sent to him via his colleague ambassadors: he needed a flow of paperwork to act on the diplomatic stage, and a state-of-the-art mandate to approach king Henry VIII and his chief adviser Thomas Wolsey in person.